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AUTHOR Winsor, Jerry L.; Lower, Frank J.
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ABSTRACT

The concepts of moral reasoning developed by Lawrence Kohlberg can be applied to the analysis of communication in intimate relationships in an attempt to deal with the high rate of marital dissolution. Kohlberg has identified three levels of moral reasoning: (1) preconventional, in which a person reasons in terms of punishment, reward, or exchange of favors; (2) conventional, in which the individual is concerned with maintaining the expectations and rules of his or her family, group, or nation for its own sake; and (3) postconventional, in which moral reasoning is based on autonomous principles. Each level contains two stages. This paradigm opens new vistas for analysis of family communication breakdowns. For instance, it is possible to hypothesize that couples who reason at the same level are likely to handle disagreements more productively, to have a better chance of staying together, and to suffer fewer family communication problems. Research is needed to check this hypothesis. Discussing moral dilemmas could help bring parents and children to higher levels of moral reasoning, which in turn may lead to the strengthening of society as a whole. (JL)

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AN APPLICATION OF KOHLBERG'S MORAL REASONING
THEORY TO UNDERSTANDING PROBLEMS OF MARITAL
AND FAMILY COMMUNICATION

Jerry L. Winsor, Ph.D.
Central Missouri State University

Frank J. Lower, Ph.D.
Louisiana State University--Shreveport

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Researchers suggest that more than one-third of all marriages are now divorces, more than one-third of marriages are unhappy relationships and less than one-third of our marriages are on a sound foundation. It is projected that, with our highly mobile population, relationships, marriages included, increasingly will become temporary. The terms being "unremarried" may replace the language construct of being "divorced." The search for a meaningful relationship may lead large segments into virtual serial marriages.¹

Gone, for many persons, are the overriding stigmas of divorce. Religious objections appear to have given way to a clerical concern as to how best to minister to the "single again" group. Families apparently are perceived as more accepting of separation and divorce than in the past. A number of sources have surfaced supporting the effectiveness of single parenthood thus, mitigating against the once potent theme of "staying together for the children." In Missouri, a study by the Division of Health reported that one of every three children born will see her/his parents divorced before he/she is 19.² While it is obvious many of the taboos of divorce have been "put asunder" in contemporary American culture, the reasons for disenchantment, generally, beg for additional analysis. Marriage is deceptively easy to achieve in our society. Currently, it is easier to obtain a marriage license than a driver's license. Regardless of the relevance of the questions of if and whom to marry as two of the most important decisions a young person may ever make, our educational systems appear relatively unsuccessful, if not outright oblivious to, what may be the most basic of the so-called basic subjects--the fourth R--(Relating.)³

Today there are approximately fifty million married couples in the United States--an all-time high. Over ninety percent of Americans marry at least once. After dissolution, four of every five divorced persons rewed within five years.⁴ Alarming, California marriages have only a 50-50 chance of success, as things

stand now.⁵ Given these and other related, alarming statistics, we who do communication research have a challenge placed before us.

What causes couples to seek dissolution of the marital relationship? According to one study, the primary contributing factor is problems with communication.⁶ The most frequent subjects of family squabbles appear to be over finances, conflicts over children and discipline, unsatisfactory sexual expression, household duties, use of leisure time, and in-law relationships. Since economic conditions have been repressed, if not depressed, it is apparent that marital stress well could be at an all time high.

Many sources have held the lamp high in search for more precise diagnostic tools. This paper represents a "think piece" that seeks to examine the relevance of levels of moral reasoning as one method for better understanding communication difficulties and their impact upon the basic family unit. We will share what we believe to be some implications for developing higher stages of moral reasoning in the nuclear family.

First let us examine the concept of levels of moral reasoning as developed by Lawrence Kohlberg and, second, let us then apply this concept to the analysis of communication in intimate relationships.

KOHLBERG'S STAGE THEORY

For the past twenty years, Dr. Kohlberg and his colleagues have studied moral reasoning in several cultures: the United States, Turkey, Taiwan, Mexico, and Malaysia.⁷ The results of three studies provided the six stages of moral development that comprise the basis of Kohlberg's theory. His research also led him to conclude that moral reasoning develops in the same way across cultures; that is, the order of the stages indicates universal development in man's moral reasoning.

Dr. Kohlberg explains that the theoretical basis of the stages of moral reasoning he proposes is found in the works of Kant, Dewey, and Piaget.⁸ The

work of Piaget in the area of cognitive structuring of children's reasoning through the use of interviews and observation is most directly related to Kohlberg's work. Kohlberg says, "In 1955, I started to redefine and validate (through longitudinal and cross-cultural study) the Dewey-Piaget levels and stages."⁹ Kohlberg now claims to have validated the stages¹⁰ and indicates that the concept of stages implies three characteristics:

1. Stages are "structured wholes," or organized systems of thought. Individuals are consistent in level of moral judgment.
2. Stages form an invariant sequence. Under all conditions except extreme trauma, movement is always forward, never backward. Individuals never skip stages; movement is always in the next stage up.
3. Stages are "hierarohical integrations." Thinking at a higher stage includes or comprehends within it lower-stage thinking. There is a tendency¹¹ to function at or prefer the highest stage available.

Kohlberg's stage theory itself is divided into three levels. Within each level there are two stages, which provides six stages in all. We will consider the definitions of the levels first, then turn to the six stages.

Dr. Kohlberg has identified the three levels of preconventional, conventional and postconventional. The person operating at the preconventional level responds to cultural labels of good and bad, and interprets these labels in terms of the physical consequences to himself/herself or in terms of the physical power of those who establish the rules and labels of good and bad. Thus, at this level the person reasons in terms of punishment, reward, or the exchange of favors.

The second level, conventional, can be thought of as a conformist level, but Kohlberg indicates that this is perhaps too smug a term.¹² The individual at this level is concerned with maintaining the expectations and rules of his family, group, or nation for its own sake. The concern is with both conforming to the social order and maintaining, supporting, and justifying this order.

In the postconventional level, the individual's moral reasoning is based upon autonomous principles which have validity and application apart from the individual's identification with those persons or groups. At this level the individual reasons according to internalized principles which have validity for all persons across all ages and time periods.

Additional clarification of the moral levels postulated by Kohlberg comes from a view of the levels in terms of the relationship between the self and society. Kohlberg explains:

One way of understanding the three levels is to think of them as three different types of relationship between the self and society's rules and expectations. From this point of view, a person at the preconventional level is one for whom rules and social expectations are something external to the self. A conventional person has achieved a socially normative appreciation of the rules and expectations of others, especially authorities, and identifies with the occupants of social or societal role relationships. The principled (or postconventional) person has differentiated self from normative roles and defines values in terms of self-constructed reflective principles.¹³

As indicated earlier, within each of the three levels there are two stages. The first two stages occur at the preconventional level. Kohlberg explains these stages as follows:

Stage 1: Orientation toward punishment and unquestioning deference to superior power. The physical consequences of action regardless of their human meaning or value determine its goodness or badness.

Stage 2: Right action consists of that which instrumentally satisfies one's own needs and occasionally the needs of others. Human relations are viewed in terms like those of the marketplace, moments of fairness, of reciprocity, and equal sharing are present, but they are always interpreted in a physical, pragmatic way. Reciprocity is a matter of you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours not of loyalty, gratitude, or justice.¹⁴

The third and fourth stages occur at the conventional level. Again Kohlberg explains:

Stage 3: Good-boy--good-girl orientation. Good behavior is that which pleases or helps others and is approved by them. There is much conformity to stereotypical images of what is

majority or natural behavior. Behavior is often judged by intention--"he means well" becomes important for the first time, and is overused, as by Charlie Brown in Peanuts. One seeks approval by being "nice."

Stage 4: Orientation toward authority, fixed rules and the maintenance of the social order. Right behavior consists of doing one's duty, showing respect for authority and maintaining the given social order for its own sake. One earns respect by performing dutifully.¹⁵

The final two stages are found in the postconventional level. Kohlberg describes these stages as follows:

Stage 5: A social-contract orientation, generally with legalistic and utilitarian overtones. Right action tends to be defined in terms of general rights and in terms of standards which have been critically examined and agreed upon by the whole society. There is a clear awareness of the relativism of personal values and opinions and a corresponding emphasis upon procedural rules for reaching consensus. Aside from what is constitutionally and democratically agreed upon, right or wrong is a matter of personal "values" and "opinion." The result is an emphasis upon the "legal point of view," but with an emphasis upon the possibility of changing the law in terms of rational considerations of social utility, rather than freezing it in the terms of Stage 4 "law and order." Outside the legal realm, free agreement and contract are the binding elements of obligation. This is the official morality of the American government, and finds its ground in the thought of the writers of the Constitution.

Stage 6: Orientation toward the decisions of conscience and toward self-chosen ethical principles appealing to logical comprehensiveness, universality, and consistency. These principles are abstract and ethical (the Golden Rule, the categorical imperative); they are not concrete moral rules like the Ten Commandments. Instead, they are universal principles of justice, of the reciprocity and equality of human rights, and of respect for the dignity of human beings as individual persons.¹⁶

Kohlberg's studies are based on a series of interviews with student and adult subjects regarding their responses to a series of moral dilemmas the researcher poses to them. An important feature of Kohlberg's work concerns the stress upon the moral reasoning employed by the subject. There are no necessarily right or wrong answers to the dilemmas; rather the researcher codes the statements of reasoning employed. The reader may be helped in his/her understanding of the stages by having an opportunity to see how subjects' responses are coded by Kohlberg.

The most frequently cited of Kohlberg's dilemmas is the case of Heinz.

The story appears below:

In Europe, a woman was near death from cancer. One drug might save her, a form of radium that a druggist in the same town had recently discovered. The druggist was charging \$2,000, ten times what the drug cost him to make. The sick woman's husband, Heinz, went to everyone he knew to borrow the money, but he could only get together about half of what is cost. He told the druggist that his wife was dying and asked him to sell it cheaper or let him pay later. But the druggist said, 'no.' The husband got desperate and broke into the man's store to steal the drug for his wife. Should the husband have done that? Why?¹⁷

The answer to the question "should the husband have done that?" is not what is important to Kohlberg. Rather, the answers to "why" and to additional probing questions the researcher uses will determine at what level of moral reasoning the subject is operating. Examples of pro and con responses at each stage will help clarify this point.

Stage 1: Punishment and obedience orientation.

Pro: It isn't really bad to take it--he did ask to pay for it first. He wouldn't do any other damage or take anything else and the drug he'd take is only worth \$200, he's not really taking a \$2,000 drug.

Con: Heinz doesn't have any permission to take the drug. He can't just go and break through a window or break the door down. He'd be a bad criminal doing all that damage. That drug is worth a lot of money and stealing anything so expensive would really be a big crime.¹⁸

Both of these examples are silent as to Heinz's intentions. They do not consider any obligation to his wife. The statements judge the crime in terms of the consequences of Heinz's action.

Stage 2: Instrumental relativist orientation.

Pro: Heinz isn't really doing any harm to the druggist, and he can always pay him back. If he doesn't want to lose his wife, he should take the drug because it's the only thing that will work.

Con: The druggist isn't wrong or bad, he just wants to make a profit like everyone else. That's what you're in business for, to make money. Business is business.¹⁹

At Stage 2, the intentions are very much in evidence. The pro statement mentions an intention to pay the druggist back, and the con statement shifts to the druggist's

position indicating that the druggist is just like everyone else in wanting to make a profit. The hedonism contained in the pro statement is quite egoistic in suggesting that Heinz should commit the crime only "If he doesn't want to lose his wife." There is no concern shown for the wife. If Heinz does want to lose her, or if he doesn't care that much, it's a tough break for the wife.

Stage 3: Interpersonal concordance.

Pro: Stealing is bad but this is a bad situation. Heinz isn't doing wrong in trying to save his wife; he has no choice but to take the drug. He is only doing something that is natural for a good husband to do. You can't blame him for doing something out of love for his wife. You'd blame him if he didn't love his wife enough to save her.

Con: If Heinz's wife dies he can't be blamed in these circumstances. You can't say he is a heartless husband just because he won't commit a crime. The druggist is the selfish and heartless one in this situation. Heinz tried to do everything he really could.²⁰

Now both answers are clearly fully involved in the parties' intentions. The answers discuss who can be approved of and who cannot be approved of by measuring their intentions. Both answers find Heinz blameless, but the con statement in addition shifts the blame to the druggist.

Stage 4: Law and order orientation.

Pro: The druggist is leading a wrong kind of life if he just lets somebody die like that, so it's Heinz's duty to save her. But Heinz can't just go around breaking laws and let it go at that--he must pay the druggist back and he must take his punishment for stealing.

Con: It's a natural thing for Heinz to want to save his wife, but it's still always wrong to steal. You have to follow the rules regardless of the specific circumstances.²¹

Here the statements consider intentions but add to that some perceptions of a natural law. Nonetheless, both the pro and the con statements eventually arrive at the conclusion that the obligation to obey the law overrides any "natural" inclinations Heinz may have.

Stage 5: Social contract orientation.

Pro: Before you say stealing is wrong you've got to really think about this whole situation. Of course the laws are quite clear about breaking into a store. And even worse, Heinz would know there were no legal grounds for his action. Yet, I can see why it would be reasonable for anybody in this kind of situation to steal the drug.

Con: I can see the good that would come from illegally taking the drug, but the ends don't justify the means. You can often find a good action behind illegal action. You can't say Heinz would be completely wrong to steal the drug, but even these circumstances don't make it right.²²

The Stage 5 statements demonstrate a more complex decision making process. Here we find that for both sides neither good intentions alone nor the law alone is sufficient to guide action. There is a recognition that while the law cannot be ignored it is clearly unjust in this situation. The feeling seems to be that a better solution for these respondents would be to change the law, but since it has not been changed they find it difficult to either approve or disapprove to established procedures.

Stage 6: Universal ethical principle orientation.

Pro: Where the choice must be made between disobeying the law and saving a human life, the higher principle of preserving life makes it morally right--not just understandable--to steal the drug.

Con: There are so many cases of cancer today that with any new drug cure, I'd assume that the drug would be scarce and that there wouldn't be enough to go around to everybody. The right course of action can only be the one which is consistent to all people concerned. Heinz ought to act, not according to what is legal in this case, but according to what he conceives an ideally just person would do in this situation.²³

At the Stage 6 level of reasoning, both answers are quick to affirm the position that the law may be disobeyed if a higher principle is involved. The position taken is justified on the basis of a universal principle which everyone can live by no matter what role they will be called upon to play. Notice that the special relationship between husband and wife gives way at this stage to an even more important consideration of the supremacy of life over property.

With the foregoing discussion in mind, the reader is directed to Table 1 which provides the definition of the moral stages within each level. The Table provides an easy guide to the use of Kohlberg's moral stages as a ready reference for the scholar/critic in applying this theory to his rhetorical analysis.

Kohlberg's research has led him to conclude that preconventional moral reasoning is the level of most children under the age of nine. Some adolescents also reason at this level. Further, more recent studies have led him to place many criminal offenders' reasoning, both adolescent and adult, at this level. Most adolescents and adults in our society and other cultures operate at the conventional level. The postconventional level is attained by only a minority of adults and is generally not reached until after age twenty.²⁴ Kohlberg points out that "almost all individuals manifest more than 50 percent of responses at a single stage with the rest of the responses at adjacent stages."²⁵

In his discussion of Kohlberg's moral stages, Jack B. Fraenkel points out Kohlberg's belief "that the six stages are universal, hold true in all cultures, and each stage represents a level of reasoning higher than the one immediately preceding it."²⁶ Kohlberg states, "We claim . . . that each higher stage of reasoning is a more adequate way of resolving moral problems judged by moral-philosophic criteria."²⁷ In terms of the focus of Kohlberg's studies, one of the more important findings is that children and adults prefer the highest level of moral reasoning that they can understand. They tend to reject the arguments based at lower stages as too simplistic and sometimes naive, but Kohlberg and Turiel determined that they usually cannot understand arguments based on reasoning more than one stage above their own.²⁸

APPLICATION: KOHLBERG'S STAGES OF MORAL REASONING TO INTIMATE COMMUNICATION

We believe Lawrence Kohlberg's paradigm offers several spin-offs for those interested in understanding family communication problems and their potential remedies.

Even a cursory reading of Kohlberg's research should give communication researchers some heuristic concepts. For example: a father/mother attempting to reason with a youthful offspring may be only frustrating the child as well as themselves as they present a concept of "love thy neighbor as thyself." If Kohlberg's logic holds, the child, quite likely reasoning at stage one, or two at most, likely is not able to comprehend, let alone appreciate a stage five or six post-conventional line of reasoning such as "turn the other cheek" when another child encroaches upon his/her tricycle. Parents can learn from a study of Kohlberg to diagnose crossed-stage reasoning problems and lead the child to understand why their behavior must be altered through no more than a one stage higher line of reasoning. Therefore, it is probable that Kohlberg has opened new vistas for analysis of family communication breakdowns. Therapists, now facile in Transactional Analysis, Rational Emotional Therapy, etc. well could complement their skills via a thorough understanding of Kohlberg's analytical methodology.

Many contemporary family therapists focus on the spouse subsystem in attempting to deal with the misunderstanding of meanings in the modern family.²⁹ Ralph H. Turner implies, we believe, a connection to Kohlberg when he writes:

Couples are mutually attracted because they share similar values, and presumably parent-child and sibling bonds vary likewise according to their similarity in values. It is not so much the pursuit of these values as goals of collaborative activity, however, that makes them relevant to bonding but their effect on the interpersonal relationships that are incident to association for any purpose whatever.³⁰

As a result of this link, we offer the following hypotheses: 1) Couples who reason at the same relative level of moral reasoning are more likely to handle disagreements more productively and acrimoniously than those who are more than one stage apart, 2) couples will have a better chance of staying together and 3) such couples, if parents, will have fewer family communication problems.

We call for research to test these hypotheses. Dialogue available from counselling sessions could serve as data for study. Inter-rater reliability has been demonstrated for evaluation of stages of reasoning in rhetorical discourse.³¹

We believe that children and parents can be led to reason at higher levels of moral reasoning through discussing moral dilemmas such as the Heinz situation. Hypothetical situations can be added to "real life" situations to provide continuous material for family discussion and analysis. Parents as well as siblings thus become more acutely aware of the level of their reasoning.

Another opportunity afforded parents, with even broader implications on family well-being is to use the Kohlberg paradigm suggested here in discussing with spouse and children the moral questions and dilemmas posed by various popular television programs. Such a discussion, while strengthening the family moral reasoning and understanding, will also aid in their controlling the impact of television.

Since improvements in level of moral reasoning are correlated by Kohlberg with improved moral behavior in a given society, the process of study of moral dilemmas should not only improve communication in our homes but our society as well.

If quarreling couples can recognize some of the reasons why they fail to communicate affectively they will have some means to learn to ameliorate their problems.

The use of Kohlberg's stages can provide a stronger moral base upon which the family can operate and communicate. Since the family is the basic unit of society,³² it stands to reason the use of moral reasoning stages in the family unit can provide the basis for strengthening our society as a whole.

How important is moral reasoning to contemporary society? It is our belief that nearly every persuasive communication at some point asks the receiver to make a moral decision. To be successful, the presenter will need to deal with values the auditor holds dear. This being the case, Kohlberg tells us, "The most fundamental values in a society are termed moral, and the major moral values in our

society are the values of justice."³³ Thus, to the extent the communicant deals with fundamental values, she or he deals with morals, and ideally they will address himself to the value of justice. That the concern for morality is a dominant one in our society is confirmed by Roger Brown and Richard J. Hernstein:

In fact, since Kohlberg started his work, America has changed from a society in rather stable equilibrium to a society that is, as newspapers like to say, rent by conflict. The result is that thinking people have been driven beyond conformity to what exists, to try to find some widely acceptable ground on which established practices can be either defended or altered. In effect, we have moved into a great age of moral reasoning, as we did during the Civil War and the American Revolution, which were also times of massive conflict in the norms of the society as a whole. Today's newspapers, books, magazines, television programs are all filled with moral arguments, not primarily about sex or swearing, but about other matters. And it is inevitable that the society will seek to understand what it can of this process of psychology and philosophy.³⁴

We might add to this observation that the members of the speech communication community should likewise be interested in this new age of moral reasoning. Kohlberg's moral stages theory offers us a systematic means of identifying and understanding the moral reasoning that surrounds us.

END NOTES

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Table I

Definition of Moral Stages

I. Preconventional Level

At this level, the child is responsive to cultural rules and labels of good and bad, right or wrong, but interprets these labels either in terms of the physical or the hedonistic consequences of action (punishment, reward, exchange of favors) or in terms of the physical power of those who enunciate the rules and labels. The level is divided into the following two stages:

Stage 1: The Punishment and Obedience Orientation. The physical consequences of action determine its goodness or badness, regardless of the human meaning or value of these consequences. Avoidance of punishment and unquestioning deference to power are valued in their own right, not in terms of respect for an underlying moral order supported by punishment and authority (the latter being Stage 4).

Stage 2: The Instrumental-Relativist Orientation. Right action consists of that which instrumentally satisfies one's own needs and occasionally the needs of others. Human relations are viewed in terms like those of the marketplace. Elements of fairness, or reciprocity, and of equal sharing are present, but they are always interpreted in a physical, pragmatic way. Reciprocity is a matter of "you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours," not of loyalty, gratitude, or justice.

II. Conventional Level

At this level, maintaining the expectations of the individual's family, group, or nation is perceived as valuable in its own right, regardless of immediate and obvious consequences. The attitude is not only one of conformity to personal expectations and social order, but of loyalty to it, of actively maintaining, supporting, and justifying the order, and of identifying with the persons or group involved in it. At this level, there are the following two stages:

Stage 3: The Interpersonal Concordance or "Good Boy - Nice Girl" orientation. Good behavior is that which pleases or helps others and is approved by them. There is much conformity to stereotypical images of what is majority or "natural" behavior. Behavior is frequently judged by intention--"he means well" becomes important for the first time. One earns approval by being "nice."

Stage 4: The "Law and Order" Orientation. There is orientation toward authority, fixed rules, and the maintenance of the social order. Right behavior consists of doing one's duty, showing respect for authority, and maintaining the given social order for its own sake.

III. Postconventional, Autonomous, or Principled Level

At this level, there is a clear effort to define moral values and principles that have validity and application apart from the authority of the groups or persons holding these principles and apart from the individual's own identification with these groups. This level also has two stages:

Stage 5: The Social-Contract, Legalistic Orientation, generally with utilitarian overtones. Right action tends to be defined in terms of general individual rights and standards which have been critically examined and agreed upon by the whole society. There is a clear awareness of the relativism of personal values and opinions and a corresponding emphasis upon precedural rules for reaching consensus. Aside from what is constitutionally and democratically agreed upon, the right is a matter of personal "values" and "opinion." The result is an emphasis upon the "legal point of view," but with an emphasis upon the possibility

of changing law in terms of rational considerations of social utility (rather than freezing it in terms of Stage 4 "law and order"). Outside the legal realm, free agreement and contract is the binding element of obligation. This is the "official" morality of the American government and constitution.

Stage 6: The Universal-Ethical-Principle Orientation. Right is defined by the decision of conscience in accord with self-chosen ethical principles appealing to logical comprehensiveness, universality, and consistency. These principles are abstract and ethical (the Golden Rule, the categorical imperative); they are not concrete moral rules like the Ten Commandments. At heart, these are universal principles of justice, of the reciprocity and equality of human rights, and of respect for the dignity of human beings as individual persons ("From Is to Ought," pp. 164, 165).

--Reprinted from The Journal of
Philosophy, October 25, 1973.